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ABSTRACT

This paper documents migrant farm workers as being among the most persistently underprivileged groups in American society. Migrant farm workers typically receive low wages from irregular employment and live in poverty with access to only substandard housing and inadequate health care. The lack of economic improvement stems from a number of sociopolitical factors, including the political powerlessness of farm workers, the political influence of agricultural employers, and the marginal status of farm workers in United States agriculture development. Only a limited number of local and regional studies of migrant workers are available. Migrant workers are predominantly male with a median age of 32. Their racial composition is about 46 percent White, 15 percent Hispanic, and 39 percent Black and other races. Depending on the nature of the work, families may work together as a group or the adults may travel leaving families behind. Migrants in 1988 had an annual median income of $7,330, with an average of 5.2 persons dependent upon this income, placing them under the poverty level. Inadequate health care and migration are detrimental to the education of this population. The number of workers needed in agriculture has been declining and will probably continue to decline due to continued mechanization in agriculture production. However, an increase in farming of labor-intensive crops would increase the demand for farm workers for short periods of time. Other issues addressed include the impact of erratic immigration policies and minimum wage legislation. Few needs of the politically and economically powerless migrant workers will be met until it is recognized that farm workers have the same rights as employees in other industries. (LP)

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Chapter 7

Migrant Farm Workers

Doris P. Slesinger and Max J. Pfeffer

Migrant farm workers are among the most underprivileged groups in our society. Typically, they receive low wages from irregular employment and live in poverty with access only to substandard housing and inadequate health care. Perhaps what is most disturbing about migrant-farm-worker poverty is its persistence over time. Farm labor has never commanded much more than a subsistence wage, and migrant farm work, where individuals and families follow the planting and harvesting of crops, has usually been compensated at the lowest of wages available for hired farm workers.

Migrant farm workers have been an important part of the agricultural economy in the United States for more than a century, and during that time many of the conditions of their lives have not improved. As noted by a Washington State Employment Security Department report (1990), seasonal and migrant farm workers can be viewed as a "contingency" work force, since they are needed in large numbers for temporary work at certain times of the year. These workers have special needs, since they typically have little security and fewer benefits than do permanent workers. This state of affairs is in stark contrast to the advances made by workers in other sectors of the economy during the twentieth century.

Official agencies differ in their definitions of "migrant." The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition of a migrant farm worker is "someone who temporarily crosses state or county boundaries and stays overnight to do hired farm work" (Oliveira and Cox 1988, p. 8). Other federal agencies use slightly different definitions. The U.S. Department of Education divides migrant families into two categories: "currently migrant," meaning that a member of the family was employed in agriculture and stayed overnight away from home within the past two years; and "formerly migrant," meaning that the family member was engaged in migrant agricultural work within the past six years. Some federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Labor, regard work in meat processing or in canneries as not "agricultural"; thus migrant work forces working in these

Map 7.1
Migrant Farm Worker Streams in the United States

Source: Map provided by National Migrant Resource Program, Inc., 1987, Austin, Texas

industries are not considered migrant agricultural workers; even sheepshearers who travel on contract are not considered "migrant" workers. On the other hand, the U.S. Public Health Service considers all workers and family members who fit any definition of "migrant" by any one or another of the federal programs as eligible for the health services specifically provided for migrant and seasonal farm workers (Slesinger and Cautley 1988). For our purposes, USDA's fairly general and inclusive definition is the most useful.

As Map 7.1 indicates, there are three primary streams of migrant workers in the United States: the western, central, and eastern. In the West migrants travel north from northern Mexico, southern Texas, and southern California up the West Coast. Northern Mexico and southern Texas are also the sending areas for the migrants who travel in the Midwest. Both these streams are made up primarily of people of Mexican heritage. The third or eastern stream is ethnically more varied. Blacks living in rural Florida often migrate northward up the coast, working in Georgia, the Carolinas, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York State. However, the East Coast also attracts Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Mexicans, and Southeast Asians, some of whom spend the winter in major cities. Some migrants in each stream are citizens of the United States; others are recently arrived immigrants under refugee status; still others are under contracts with foreign governments for specific harvest (e.g., apples or sugar beets); and others are illegal workers, who never have obtained work permits. It also should be noted that over 40 percent of the migrants are likely to work within the state in

which they reside, especially in the states of California, Florida, and Texas (Martin 1988, p. 54).

Little is yet known about the effects of the new "amnesty" Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 on the quantity of agricultural workers in the United States. This law permitted workers to apply for citizenship who could prove that they had been employed in agricultural work in the United States for the past six years, but who did not have legal work permits. Preliminary evidence indicates that substantial numbers of migrant workers who have filed for citizenship have not yet left agricultural work for urban-based employment. However, there was some concern that providing legal citizenship would deplete the agricultural work force. Apparently this has not yet happened. Approximately 1,300,000 to 2,000,000 farm workers are estimated to have applied for citizenship. To date, no figures are available as to the number that have been approved (Mines 1990).

Migrant agricultural workers are employed in tasks that require hand labor from early spring to just before Christmas. In early spring they are typically employed in nurseries and seedling companies. They then may be employed to prepare the ground for planting. Often they do hand weeding and hoeing; for example, they "walk the beans" (weed the soybean rows) in Nebraska, hand weed the mint farms in Wisconsin, or plant strawberries in California. Next are the early harvests of peas, followed by the detasselling of corn and the back-breaking work of cutting cabbage and picking cucumbers, tomatoes, and strawberries. They are found in packing sheds in or near the fields, stuffing plastic bags with carrots, celery, onions, and other vegetables. After the harvest is completed in most states, they can be found spraying and shaping Christmas trees to make them green and perfect pyramids.

Some migrants work in slaughterhouses and meat-packing plants, while others work in canneries, canning fruits and vegetables. These are not field workers and so may or may not be counted as migrant farm workers. However, almost all of these workers also usually receive the minimum wage and rarely receive any fringe benefits. Today the USDA estimates that out of a work force of about 2.5 million hired farm workers, approximately 250,000 (or one in ten) fit the Oliveira and Cox definition as described earlier (Martin 1988, p. 52).

HISTORY

U.S. agriculture has used migratory labor since before the turn of the century, and racial and ethnic minorities have been and continue to be the sources of workers for migrant work. In California Chinese of the 1880s were followed by Japanese in the early 1900s and then by Filipinos in the 1920s. Immigrants from Europe provided hand labor throughout the United States in the 1920s. They included immigrants who came directly to farms from Europe, as well as immigrants who settled in major cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia and then supplemented their incomes by picking up seasonal farm work as

needed. During World War II prisoners of war were put to work planting and harvesting to make up for shortages of migrant workers. For example, in the early 1940s Wisconsin counted over 3,500 prisoners of war who worked on farms (Sorden, Long, and Salick 1948). Since the late 1940s Mexicans have streamed across the Rio Grande Valley border in search of agricultural work. In addition, many Mexican Americans living in Texas also become migratory workers every spring, returning to Texas after the harvest season in the fall. People of Mexican heritage have become the mainstay of long-distance migratory workers in the West and Midwest. However, Blacks from Florida, Louisiana, and other Southern states and Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean Islanders have also been involved in migratory agricultural work since before World War II. They, however, usually work the crops up and down the East Coast.

When domestic labor shortages occurred, such as during and after World War II, or in times of high urban employment, when rural residents flocked to cities, the United States attempted to find agricultural workers through contracts with other countries. Formal agreements with Caribbean countries such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Barbados, as well as with Mexico, especially through the well-known Bracero program (1942 to 1964), produced flows of workers.

Today most migrant workers are Hispanics and Blacks. There are also small populations of Central and Latin American immigrants and persons from the Philippines, as well as the newest group of immigrants, the Southeast Asians -- Hmong, Thai, and Laotians.

THE EXCLUSION OF FARM WORKERS FROM SOCIAL LEGISLATION

Farm workers have not benefitted from the various pieces of the social legislation that were beginning to be enacted in the 1930s by state and federal governments. Many of these laws were established to improve the lives of hired employees. For example, unemployment insurance coverage established as part of the Social Security Act in 1935 excluded farm workers. It was not until 1976 that most farm workers were granted such benefits. Likewise, farm workers were excluded from the minimum-wage guarantees granted industrial workers under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Not until 1966 was minimum-wage protection granted to some farm workers. Workers compensation laws are intended to provide individuals with basic protection from injuries incurred at work. There is no federal workers compensation, however; such coverage is established by individual states. As Table 7.1 shows, few states offer farm workers such compensation to the same extent that they cover other workers. The lack of such coverage is all the more critical given the irregular enforcement of Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations within the farm sector. The ability of farm workers to address employment-related grievances more directly via collective bargaining with employers is hamstrung by their exclusion from the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act that established

Table 7.1
Type of Workers' Compensation Coverage for Agricultural Workers by State, 1986

Agricultural Workers Covered the Same as All Other Workers	Limitations on Coverage for Agricultural Workers	Voluntary Coverage Available for Workers*
Arizona	Alaska	Alabama
California	Delaware	Arkansas
Colorado	Florida	Georgia
Connecticut	Illinois	Idaho
District of Columbia	Iowa	Indiana
Hawaii	Maine	Kansas
Louisiana	Maryland	Kentucky
Massachusetts	Michigan	Mississippi
Montana	Minnesota	Nebraska
New Hampshire	Missouri	Nevada
New Jersey	New York	New Mexico
Ohio	North Carolina	North Dakota
Oregon	Oklahoma	Rhode Island
	Pennsylvania	South Carolina
	South Dakota	Tennessee
	Texas	
	Utah	
	Vermont	
	Virginia	
	Washington	
	West Virginia	
	Wisconsin	
	Wyoming	

Source: Runyan 1989.

*Employers may volunteer to participate in the program, but are not required by law to do so.

the right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively. Such protective legislation has been granted farm workers in just two states, Hawaii in 1945 and California in 1975 (Goldfarb 1981; Runyan 1989).

Moreover, existing farm legislation offers no direct relief of farm worker poverty. The farm programs in effect today provide farmers with some relief from low incomes. These programs, first established by New Deal legislation, were designed to mitigate the effects of commodity surpluses and low farm commodity prices on farmers' incomes, but they contain no provisions for the direct support of farm workers' earnings. Parallel programs enacted under the New Deal that were intended to serve hired farm workers more directly have not endured (Daniel 1981; Majka and Majka 1982; Pfeffer and Gilbert 1989).

The New Deal recovery programs of the 1930s established the precedent of explicitly excluding farm workers from social legislation (Morris 1945; Goldfarb

1981). Although a number of programs administered by the Farm Security Administration, the Resettlement Administration, and other New Deal agencies directly benefitted farm workers, these programs received limited funding and were eventually discontinued. Most appropriations administered by the Department of Agriculture under the New Deal recovery programs went to commercial farmers, distributed via the Agricultural Adjustment Program, the Farm Credit Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation. The basic farm programs enacted in the 1930s remain in effect today and include no provisions for the alleviation of poverty amongst farm workers. The architects of the New Deal did not explicitly include farm workers in major farm legislation on the premise that the farm programs would increase aggregate farm income, and farm workers would benefit indirectly as farmers raised wages. It was assumed that farmers would raise wages because of their close personal interest in the economic well-being of their workers (Daniel 1981; Goldfarb 1981; Majka and Majka 1982). This assumption embodied in the farm programs has never been effectively challenged, despite evidence spanning more than fifty years that the benefits received by farmers are typically not translated into improved employment conditions for workers (Daniel 1981; Pfeffer and Gilbert 1989).

Although farm workers in general have historically been excluded from protective legislation as described here, migrant farm workers fare worst of all. Their work at any one farm is typically for a short period of time, and they must travel from place to place in search of employment. Thus migrant farm workers earn less than farm workers employed year-round in one place; even seasonal farm workers living in the locality in which they are employed fare better than the migrants. The seasonal farm workers are able to draw on a network of friends and kin to improve their standard of living. Furthermore, they have the benefit of stable access to educational and health-care facilities (Thomas 1985; Jenkins 1985). Not until 1983, when the U.S. Congress passed the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSAWPA), were some of the special needs of migrant farm workers recognized. This is the first and only legislation geared specifically to the protection of migrant farm workers. This legislation was enacted to protect migrant and seasonal farm workers in terms of pay and working conditions. However, for the most part these protections are guaranteed only to those workers employed by farm-labor contractors, not to those employed directly by the farm owner or operator. Agricultural employers who contract employees only for their own operations are exempt from many of MSPA's provisions (Runyan 1989).

Migrant workers are continually vulnerable, even under the protection of established laws. For example, as recently as 1988, in Wisconsin and in several other states, employers tried to have migrant workers classified as "independent contractors" instead of hired farm workers. This would allow employers to "contract" with the workers and thus pay neither Social Security, workers compensation, nor unemployment compensation. In other words, employers

wanted to evade the requirements of the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act. Migrant workers in Wisconsin obtained assistance from the state's Legal Action. A lawsuit filed by the U.S. Department of Labor, assisted by Legal Action of Wisconsin, resulted in the grower's case being thrown out in the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The court found that migrant workers were clearly employees of growers and thus were entitled to protection under the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Another example concerned Mexican workers hired by a Wisconsin tobacco farmer in 1989. The farmer housed twenty-two people in one house trailer, which was without electricity, bottled gas, or running water. The situation was revealed when other migrant workers reported the situation to Legal Action. However, under Wisconsin statutes at the time, tobacco was not a crop whose workers were protected under the state's 1977 Migrant Labor Law. Tobacco was not among those products classified as a food or food product, sod, or nursery work, the only types of products included in the law. Thus the farmer's inhuman and unsanitary behavior could not be prosecuted under the state's migrant labor law. Fortunately, this situation was covered by the federal Fair Labor Standards Act and the Agricultural Workers' Protection Act, and the farmer was prosecuted. The next year, a bill was passed in the state legislature to add tobacco to the crops covered by the Migrant Labor Law. The latter law regulates work contracts and compensation as well as housing standards and sanitary conditions.

FARM WORKERS AND AGRARIAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Despite their poverty, migrant farm workers have been excluded from many of the benefits and protections granted to other wage workers. The view of farm workers in American agrarian ideology established an important basis for leaving them out of much farm and labor legislation. Farm work was never held in high esteem in U.S. society. According to the agrarian ideal established early in our history, the work status of the hired farm worker was expected to be temporary. According to this ideal, working for another farmer was considered only as a step toward becoming an independent farm operator. Farm employment was seen as a means for individuals to amass the capital and skills necessary to begin to farm on their own. Farm work was thought of as an apprenticeship whereby one could develop the myriad of skills required to successfully operate a farm. Over time it was expected that hired employees would function with a degree of autonomy similar to that of the farm owner (Schwartz 1945; Daniel 1981; Kloppenburg and Geisler 1985). Depictions of the agrarian ideal typically stressed the homogenizing effect of farm work on the relationships between farmers and their hired employees. Because the worker would soon achieve the same status as his employer, it was assumed that there was little basis for conflicts of interest. Furthermore, because they labored in close personal contact with one another on a daily basis, strong social bonds would presumably be established

between the farmer and the worker. Hired workers intent on becoming independent farmers in the locality, it was believed, would also establish social ties via participation in community institutions like churches and schools. Some discussions of the agrarian ideal acknowledged that not all workers would be in a position to become independent farm operators, and that farmers would sometimes have to employ individuals on a more temporary basis during exceptionally busy times like the crop harvest. However, the general consensus was that such workers would not be treated as a class apart, because they were part of an integrated rural community (Coulter 1912; Schwartz 1945; Daniel 1981).

While the extent to which agricultural development in the United States ever actually approximated the agrarian ideal is debatable,[1] it is clear that the interests and possibilities of the rural populace in scaling the agricultural ladder from farm worker to independent farm operator were limited. This fact was borne out in the steady stream of migrants out of rural areas in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this process the position of hired labor in U.S. agriculture became increasingly marginal, because farmers relied increasingly on machinery as they attempted to expand production and overcome persistent shortages of labor. Consequently, many farms, especially in the Midwest and the Great Plains, were operated with virtually no labor beyond that provided by the farm family (Friedmann 1978; Pfeffer 1983a). In those cases where seasonal or migrant labor was required for the cultivation and harvesting of labor-intensive crops like fruits, vegetables, and tobacco, the hired farm work force was virtually invisible within the sea of family-labor farms.

IDEALIZATION OF THE FAMILY FARM

Although important exceptions to the family-farm model have existed in parts of the South and the West, the bulk of all farms in the United States have been, and continue to be, family operations. This form of organization was hailed as the best approximation of the agrarian ideal developed in the course of U.S. history. The marginal importance of farm workers on family farms meant that the characterization embodied in the agrarian ideal of harmonious employer-employee relations remained unchallenged. This notion became an important legitimating factor for the exclusion of farm workers from social legislation enacted in the 1930s.

As noted earlier, farm workers' exclusion from a variety of New Deal labor legislation was based on the assumption that there was no conflict of interest between farm workers and their employers. This point becomes most clear when one considers the exclusion of farm workers from coverage under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). This legislation "provided a legal and institutional framework for industrial conflict, and an environment conducive to the growth of a . . . labor movement that could confront employers directly" (Daniel 1981, p. 173). When pressed to provide a justification for the exclusion of farm workers from coverage under the NLRS, New Deal spokesmen "argued that the interests

Table 7.2
Farms by Amount of Wages Paid, United States, 1987

Annual Wages Paid ($)	Percentage of All Farms
None	60.8
1-999	18.3
1,000-4,999	9.3
5,000-9,999	3.5
10,000-24,999	4.5
25,000-49,999	1.9
50,000-79,999	.8
80,000-99,999	.2
100,000 +	.7
Total	100.0
Number of farms	2,087,734

Source: 1987 Census of Agriculture.

of farm workers . . . would be protected under the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which would provide not only greater aggregate income for the agricultural sector, but also a fair sharing of that new wealth at every level of the farming economy" (Daniel 1981, p. 174).

The basic assumption at the time was that farm workers were in no need of special protection because of the special character of labor relations in agriculture, that is, the close personal relations between farmers and their employees (Morris 1945; Goldfarb 1981). While this assumption may have been valid for the many farms that employed very little hired labor, those employing large numbers of workers more closely approximated the industrial model of labor organization than the agrarian ideal. Indeed, an enduring characteristic of agricultural employment is its concentration on a relatively small number of large farms nationwide. In 1987 about 1.5 percent of all farms had sales of $500,000 or more and accounted for almost 55 percent of all expenditures for farm labor (Schwartz 1945; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1989a).

AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYERS AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL

While family farms have dominated the rural landscape in terms of sheer numbers, farms employing large numbers of workers can also be found. Table 7.2 shows that more than three-fifths of all farms in the United States (60.8

percent) reported no wage labor expenses. On the other hand, a small number of farms reported very large payrolls. For example, 15,150 farms reported paying more than $100,000 in wages annually. Hired labor is most important on farms growing labor-intensive crops like fruits and vegetables, and such employment tends to be erratic during the production season. Workers unable to secure steady employment on any one farm are often required to move from one employer to another. The geographical range of such movement is extended when there is regional specialization in a limited number of crops, because workers are forced to migrate to another location when seasonal employment in the local specialty dries up.

Farms specializing in the production of labor-intensive commodities are found throughout the United States, but the demand for migrant farm workers is especially pronounced in areas where most farms are engaged in the production of labor-intensive crops. In parts of Florida, Texas, and California, farms are typically very large and engage in highly specialized production. Labor relations on such farms bear little resemblance to the agrarian ideal discussed earlier. Observers have long noted that labor relations on large-scale farms are quite impersonal. Workers are viewed abstractly as labor, that is, as a factor of production to be utilized as efficiently as possible in the production process (Daniel 1981).

To minimize the costs associated with employing farm workers, farmers have sought to maximize their control over the work force. Such control is often at odds with the interests of farm workers. For example, farmers have typically attempted to hold down wages, and these efforts have kept workers living in poverty. Farmers have also made an effort to insure that workers are readily available when needed for a particular farm operation and that they remain on the job until the work involved is completed. However, when these workers have been no longer needed on the farm, they have been encouraged to leave the area in search of other work so that any direct or indirect costs associated with their maintenance (e.g., the provision of social services, education, and so on) would be minimized (Jenkins 1985; Pfeffer 1986).

To maintain control of the migrant farm work force, employers of large numbers of farm workers have sought to influence government policy. Part of their strategy is to represent their interests as identical to those of the broader farm sector. In doing so, they have been able to conjure up the agrarian ideal as a means of generating sympathy for their cause. Thus initiatives to improve the lot of farm workers have been portrayed as inimical to the economic survival of all farmers, both large and small. The central argument presented against protective legislation for farm workers is the need to protect family farmers from exorbitant costs. The exclusion of farm workers from protective labor legislation has played an important part in maintaining the powerlessness of farm workers to improve their working conditions (Daniel 1981; Goldfarb 1981).

FARM WORKER POWERLESSNESS

Migrant farm workers enjoy few of the advantages presumed to stem from close personal ties between workers and their employers. As noted earlier, this notion embodied in the agrarian ideal has been used to justify their exclusion from protective legislation granted other workers. In light of this experience, it is not surprising that migrant farm workers have remained an impoverished segment of American society. Moreover, they have been unable to mount successful drives to improve the conditions of their lives.

On the face of things, farm workers hold a strategic position. Given the perishability of many farm commodities, the failure of workers to harvest the crop could prove disastrous for farmers. However, several factors have come together to limit the effectiveness of collective efforts to promote farm worker interests. For one thing, given their impoverished condition, migrant farm workers have lacked a resource base with which to challenge established social structures. For another, migrants have never been a stable part of the agricultural community like the farm workers portrayed in the agrarian ideal. The erratic and seasonal nature of their employment contributes to their exclusion from membership in a stable community and has inhibited the development of social solidarity with other farm workers. This lack of rootedness in a community also makes them ineligible for a variety of social services offered to local residents (Jenkins 1985).

The social marginality of migrants has been reinforced by the active recruitment of ethnic and racial minorities into farm work. Such recruitment has sometimes been justified on account of the unwillingness of Whites to work on farms, given the more desirable working conditions in urban areas. This practice was effective because of racist sentiments of employers and labor unions in urban areas. Racism had the effect of excluding the Chinese, Japanese, Blacks, Filipinos, Mexicans, and others from all but the most menial jobs in urban areas (Schwartz 1945; Pfeffer 1983b). The powerlessness of migrant farm workers was in part due to "the recruitment of a workforce whose estrangement from the social and cultural mainstream was so profound and unalterable as to render it captive economically" (Daniel 1981, p. 27).

The success of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union in California in the late 1960s and the 1970s raised the prospect of a new era for migrant farm workers. For the first time in U.S. history, what appeared to be a stable organization representing the interests of farm workers had come into being. However, the 1980s proved to be a difficult time for the UFW. Membership has declined steadily, and many of the gains won in previous years appear to be in jeopardy. For example, new technologies that permit the field packaging of products like lettuce and broccoli have served to erode the UFW's base of power. In 1977 the UFW and the Teamsters Union reached an agreement on the organization of agricultural workers. Under this agreement the UFW had jurisdiction to organize field workers, and the Teamsters would limit their organizing

efforts to workers in packing-shed and postharvest handling operations. But the advent of field packing technologies eroded this distinction, and the Teamsters have been able to negotiate contracts with growers to cover between 5,000 and 6,000 workers involved in such operations. Many of these workers are migrant workers, but of a new sort. They tend to be skilled workers who maintain field packing machines and portable refrigeration units. These workers move with the harvest. For example, those involved with the lettuce harvest will be in the Imperial Valley and Arizona in the winter and in the Salinas Valley in the spring and summer. Unskilled packing workers tend to be local women who do not move with the production. The UFW has made no new efforts to organize workers in about the last ten years. Instead, it has concentrated on representing the approximately 25,000 workers that it has already organized. However, aggressive efforts to organize lettuce workers have been made in recent years by a breakaway group from the Teamsters. Nevertheless, the vast majority of California's farm workers (about 750,000 by some estimates) remain unorganized, and little effort has been made to organize unskilled migrant workers (Villarejo 1990). Thus what the future holds for farm workers in California remains uncertain at best and bleak at worst. Despite some success by the UFW on the West Coast, migrant farm workers in many parts of the United States have not had the benefit of organized and stable representation. For the most part, migrants remain an impoverished group lacking access to stable employment and the benefits and protections enjoyed by workers in other sectors of the economy. We get a better sense of the problems of migrant farm workers by taking a closer look at their attributes and special needs.

THE CURRENT SCENE

Migrant agricultural workers in host states are often an "invisible" population to most year-round residents who do not know when and where migrants work. This invisibility and the varying definitions of "migrant" mentioned earlier have meant that few accurate statistics have been collected on this population. Even though we know little about the characteristics of migrants on a national level (Shenkin 1974), there are a number of local and regional studies that shed some light on this population (White-Means, Chi, and McClain 1989; Rogers 1984; Bleiweis et al. 1977; Barr et al. 1988; Friedland and Nelkin 1971).

Age and Sex

Until recently, the Current Population Survey had a special supplement every two years in December to estimate the farm worker population in the nation. Workers were asked about their employment the previous two weeks. This underestimated seasonal and migrant farm workers because in the cold days of December few of them are employed in agricultural work. In addition, seasonal and migrant farm workers who live in Mexico during the winter are never

counted. Thus it is generally agreed that the number of migrant agricultural workers is underestimated. However, if we assume that the characteristics of those who are counted are similar to the characteristics of those who are not counted (this may be a dubious assumption), the following description of migrant workers in 1985 (reported by Oliveira and Cox in 1988) would be appropriate: migrant workers are predominantly male; they tend to be older workers, with a median age of 32; their racial composition is about 46 percent White, 15 percent Hispanic, and 39 percent Black and other races.

Family Status

Each group may work as a family unit, or the adults may travel as "singles," leaving families behind. The specific farm activities in which the migrants are employed often determine whether children and wives are brought along. By and large, it is an advantage to have families harvesting field crops such as green beans, cucumbers for pickles, peppers, and cabbage because families are often paid by the "bushel basket." Children are not useful if migrants work in canneries, where workers get an hourly wage, and husbands and wives often work the same shifts. Mexicans tend to travel in families; labor contracts with other nations are usually for "singles." Even if a husband and wife sign up together, it is likely that they will not be permitted to sleep in the same quarters, because when housing is provided, males and females are usually placed in separate dormitories.

Others found in the migrant population are called "freewheelers" because they roam the country in search of farm work, going where information from their "grapevine" tells them jobs are available. Because of the unpredictability of weather and the difficulty of judging whether a crop is going to be substantial or thin, freewheelers often perform an important service for farmers. However, they usually do not have labor contracts, will often accept wages that are below the minimum wage, and live in housing that is neither inspected nor even defined as "housing," such as abandoned barns or cars or even a blanket under a tree.

Socioeconomic Status

Both national data (Whitener 1984) and in-depth interviews with random samples of migrant workers in Wisconsin (Slesinger 1979a; Slesinger and Ofstead 1990) indicate that the likely annual income of migrants is barely above poverty level. Migrants who travel longer distances each year (over 500 miles) are more likely to be minorities and to receive all their income from migratory farm work (Rowe 1979). For example, in the 1989 Wisconsin study about 46 percent of the workers reported that all of their 1988 income came from migrant work. Another 22 percent supplemented income from migrant agricultural work with unemployment compensation in the winter.[2] Fifty-eight percent of the families qualified for and received Food Stamps, and one-fourth of the families also

participated in the Women, Infants, and Children's nutrition program, a program offered only to families with pregnant or lactating women and children under five. Other minor sources of income included other wage work, self-employment, and borrowing from relatives, friends, and banks. Counting all of these sources, their median family income was approximately $7,330 in 1988. On the average, 5.2 persons were dependent upon this income, placing the average household in poverty (Slesinger and Ofstead 1990).

Health Problems

Migrant health and education are two areas of contemporary major concern. Both areas were considered so seriously underserved through the usual state and local governmental and private systems that during the War on Poverty the federal government established national programs to address the special needs of this unusual population. The establishment of migrant health clinics was authorized in 1962 under the Public Health Service Act as part of the Community Health Centers program for the poor and medically underserved population. This meant that throughout the United States, federally funded migrant health clinics were opened where there were sufficient groups of migratory workers. Staffing usually included a physician placed under the National Health Service Corps, as well as physician assistants, nurse practitioners, nutritionists, and outreach workers. Recently, oversight for these clinics was combined with that of the community health centers, the network of centers that were established mostly in poor, urban neighborhoods. Medical services were expanded to include dental care and eye care.

In 1988, however, federal funding for the National Health Service Corps was almost eliminated. The administration also made a strong effort to eliminate the special federal funding of community health centers and fold it into the "block-grant" concept of giving states blocks of money and letting local political powers decide how to divide the pot of money. This was successfully fought by the community health centers and their constituency, so that federal funds still flow directly to these health centers for the poor. However, budgets have barely been maintained and have not increased with inflation. Thus in real dollars budgets have been reduced, and many services have been eliminated.

Given the authors' familiarity with Wisconsin, we can briefly explain what this has meant. In 1984 the Wisconsin migrant health clinic, La Clinica de los Campesinos, had one main location in the state, situated within reasonable reach of about 50 percent of the migrant workers in the state. It also maintained two outstations, one near a set of canneries that employed migrants, the other in a distant area where there was a large area of field work. The outstations were open two long days a week and provided medical and dental services. Three outreach workers from La Clinica traveled to the various housing camps. They identified pregnant women and infants who needed checkups or immunizations;

led small group talks about nutrition; and provided information about the services around the state that were available to migrants.

Recently, La Clinica has had to close the two outstations. For a few years they tried sending a van with a registered nurse to the different locations to conduct blood pressure screening and eye and hearing tests and to provide information about various health conditions. However, the budget was again cut in 1989, and the van sponsored by La Clinica is not in operation. An order of nuns from a nearby city has taken on this role and in the 1989 season visited the camps with a van staffed by two nurses. With only one outreach worker now budgeted by La Clinica, case-finding activities of the clinic have been sharply curtailed.

In the 1989 season Slesinger repeated the migrant health survey that was originally conducted with migrant workers in Wisconsin in 1978. The major health problems identified by migrant workers in the recent Wisconsin survey differed little from those mentioned over ten years earlier (Slesinger 1979b, p. 35). The 1989 problems included back pain, headaches, eye trouble, nervousness, irritability, dental problems, stomach trouble, coughing, shortness of breath, and trouble sleeping (Slesinger and Ofstead 1990). Preventive health care was one of the most serious unmet health needs. Almost 30 percent of the workers had never had a general physical examination, one out of four workers had never been to a dentist, and 43 percent had never had a vision test (Slesinger and Ofstead 1990; Slesinger 1979b, p. 47).

Educational Problems

From the time a child migrates with his or her parents, education suffers. The annual mobility means that the child rarely is registered in only one school each year. Often in the early ages the child is not placed in any school. Once the child is in first or second grade, however, the parents try to keep the child going to school. Once again, using an example of Wisconsin migrant families, this may mean that the child starts school late in September or early October when the family returns to Texas. By the end of March or early April the family starts its annual trek northward. As long as the family is on the move, the child will not be entered into schools along the way (this can be in Arkansas, Missouri, or Minnesota). In late May or early June, when they arrive in Wisconsin, the final receiving state, the "regular" school year is almost completed. With the advent of a summer school program especially conducted for migrant children by the Texas Migrant Council, these children are placed in preschool, elementary-school, or high-school classes with bilingual teachers. The funds to conduct these classes are provided by the 1967 amendment to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, designed to help educationally deprived children.

Not only did this federal act provide funds for hiring bilingual teachers and renting school space in receiving states, it also established the Migrant Student

Table 7.3
Distribution of Children in Wisconsin's Migrant Education Program by Total Number of Schools in which Child Enrolled between September 1, 1982, and August 31, 1983

Number of School Enrollments	Current Migrant Family*	Former Migrant Family
1	14.6	27.6
2	11.4	24.5
3	9.2	21.3
4	12.2	10.3
5	13.1	14.0
6	31.9	0.8
Incomplete Information	7.6	1.5
Total (%)	100.0	100.0
(N)	1,421	658

Source: Cautley, Slesinger, and Parra 1985.

*Current migrant families are those who have been in migrant agricultural work within the past two years. Former migrant families are those who were employed in migrant work two to six years ago.

Record Transfer System (MSRTS) in conjunction with another amendment. This is a computerized system, with educational records of migrant children from all over the United States maintained on a computer located in Little Rock, Arkansas. The purpose of this system is to track the educational records of migrant children. Thus, when a local school registers a migrant child, the office can pull the academic record of that child in order to see what grades the child has completed, what national test scores were recorded, and other basic information about the child. Very often the child returns to the same set of schools year after year. Through this system school officials can see what happened when the child was in his or her home state, and vice versa. However, discontinuities in education still prevail. Table 7.3 presents data from a review of records of children registered in Wisconsin in the MSRTS system for the 1982–83 year. Fifty-seven percent of children in families currently in the migrant work force have had four or more enrollments in one calendar year. This compares with 25 percent of children in families who had been in migrant work, but who had "settled out" of the migrant stream two to six years in the past.

For Mexican and Central and Latin American children, having a bilingual

teacher is helpful. Perhaps what is even more important is that there is some appreciation of their cultural heritage and life-style. Dropout rates are still high for children of migrant workers. In the 1989 study 72 married women aged 18–49 in migrant families had produced 307 children, or on average, 4.3 children. Of these, 182, living in 44 families, were age 12 or older and "at risk" of dropping out of school. Twelve of these mothers (27.3 percent) reported that one or more of their children had dropped out of school; approximately 40 percent had dropped out before ninth grade. Many children are forced to drop out because their labor is needed by the family. Some parents feel that children do not need high school if they are to do farm work for the rest of their lives. Some parents do not realize how difficult it is for their children to continue in school when they must leave the classroom before the term is over and start in a class after the term has begun.

Summer programs definitely help this situation. Remedial work is usually stressed in the upper grades. However, to our knowledge, no evaluation of the summer program has yet been conducted. It is hard to keep track of the educational progress of the children registered in the MSRTS program, much less those who are not registered in the program.

FUTURE TRENDS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Looking toward the future of the migrant workers, we identify five national and international trends that will affect their numbers and well-being: (1) biotechnology and genetic engineering; (2) continued mechanization in agricultural production; (3) low-chemical-input or sustainable agriculture; (4) immigration policies and patterns; and (5) federal minimum-wage increases.

First, we are now in the midst of broad applications to agricultural production of genetic engineering and biotechnology. As this is being written, there is much public concern over bovine somatotropin (BST), or bovine growth hormone (BGH) as it is popularly known, and its use on dairy herds. Although milk production and dairy farms rarely employ migrant labor, the replacement of labor by technology remains a concern. Dairy scientists anticipate greater milk production based on fewer cows and less farm labor. However, this technological advance does not target hired hands, but hits the family farm and its idealized place in American tradition, as stated earlier. Instead of hired hands being laid off, some critics of BGH suggest that it is sounding the "death knell" of the family farm.

We cannot say what additional technological and scientific developments may be under the electron microscope. But some possible developments we envision may include pickles that stop growing at three inches; lettuce that will not wilt or bruise; and corn whose sugar content will remain for a week after picking. Should these developments occur, migrant field hands will not be needed to pick and sort cucumbers for size, cut each head of lettuce individually, or work around the clock in canneries canning corn within twenty-four hours of picking.

Second, mechanization has already reduced hand picking in potatoes, grapes, tomatoes, and cherries. It is not unrealistic to expect new machines to be developed to pick apples and cucumbers. Whenever a successful mechanical picker is invented, fewer migrant hands are needed. When migrants do continue to be used after new technology is adopted, as in the case of the mobile packing operations described earlier, migrant work will involve fewer workers and may be transformed from unskilled to skilled workers with better pay.

Third, the call by some farmers, consumers, and environmentalists for the production of agricultural commodities with fewer chemical inputs has received increasing attention in recent years. Historically, chemicals served as a relatively cheap substitute for more expensive labor inputs. Such substitution is especially apparent in the use of herbicides that eliminated the need for manual or machine cultivation to control weeds. However, the negative consequences of such chemical usage are now becoming more apparent. The UFW, in particular, has made a major effort in recent years to educate the public about the perils of agricultural chemicals for farm workers. The development of agricultural practices that allow for the reduction or even elimination of chemicals from farm production may have profound effects on the lives of farm workers. Given the great health risks associated with the use of chemicals, a move toward low-input agriculture might mean improved working conditions for farm workers. It is also possible that low-input agriculture will increase the demand for labor, thereby counteracting some of the trends toward the reduced employment of migrant workers discussed earlier.

Fourth, the erratic history of immigration policies and patterns in the United States will no doubt be repeated in the future. When agricultural producers cry out for minimum-wage farm workers, usually immigrants are the only labor pool available. Yet immigration policies are political, favoring persons from countries whose ancestors are already here, or who are fleeing from political or religious persecution. Occasionally priority is also given to those whose occupations are needed. Unskilled laborers, under the latter category, have lowest priority. Therefore, as in the past, special immigration laws are created to satisfy agricultural labor demands. We anticipate that this patchwork policy will continue.

Finally, we address the minimum-wage legislation. Many critics of poverty policy have noted that marginal poverty families can be raised above poverty level if the minimum wage is raised. There is no doubt that this argument applies to migrant workers. Those who work in canneries or packing houses would get immediate raises in income. Many field workers also earn minimum hourly wages because the "bushel" rate is pegged to the minimum hourly wage.

However, workers and their families who earn only the minimum wage over the planting and harvesting season would still remain in the poverty group, because their annual income is based on their employment during only a portion of the year. For these families, a federal guaranteed annual income plan would be appropriate.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have documented, migrant farm workers as a group are poor and have always been poor. The lack of economic improvement stems from a number of sociopolitical reasons that include the political powerlessness of farm workers, the political influence of agricultural employers, and the marginal status of farm workers in U.S. agricultural development. The number of workers needed in agriculture has been declining and will probably continue to decline, due to developments in mechanization for planting and harvesting and advances in computerization of production lines in canneries and packing plants. At the same time, we anticipate that there will frequently be requirements for large groups of farm laborers for short periods of time as farmers change their crops, depending on world prices. Exemplifying this in Oregon are the thousands of new acres of asparagus fields, a crop that is labor-intensive. Other examples are the "organically grown" fruits and vegetables now being demanded by consumers. These crops often must be hand weeded instead of using applications of herbicides, and this results in sizeable labor requirements. None of these labor needs can be adequately filled by local workers, friends, neighbors, or relatives of the farmers. Migrant workers are and will be sorely needed. But until employers, government officials, organized labor, and others recognize that farm workers have the same rights as employees in other industries, few of the special needs of the politically and economically powerless migrant workers will be met.

NOTES

1. Some have proclaimed the realization of this agrarian ideal with the abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War (e.g., Cochrane 1979).

2. Unemployment compensation (UC) benefits are difficult for migrants to claim. First, they must have worked for employers who qualify to pay UC. That is, the employer must have paid cash farm wages of $20,000 or more during any calendar quarter or employed ten or more workers in agricultural labor for a minimum of twenty different weeks in this or the previous year. When a migrant is out of work, he or she must file a form on which he or she lists every employer he or she has worked for, no matter where the employer was located. The state then checks these employers to see if they are "covered" employers. If so, the person will receive UC. However, because migrants often work in many states, it is a computer nightmare to check these employers' names, especially since small employers are not covered. UC is also administered by states, so that states differ in reporting periods, qualifying work, and other requirements. It is usually migrants who are employed by large, national companies who are covered by UC, e.g., Green Giant, Del Monte, Heinz, and so on.